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REVIEW OF THE PAST YEAR.

XVIII.

A SERMON,

DELIVERED IN

THE BAPTIST CHURCH,

IN

BEAUFORT, S. C.,

SUNDAY, JAN. 7. 1855.

BY

REV. J. M. C. BREAKER.

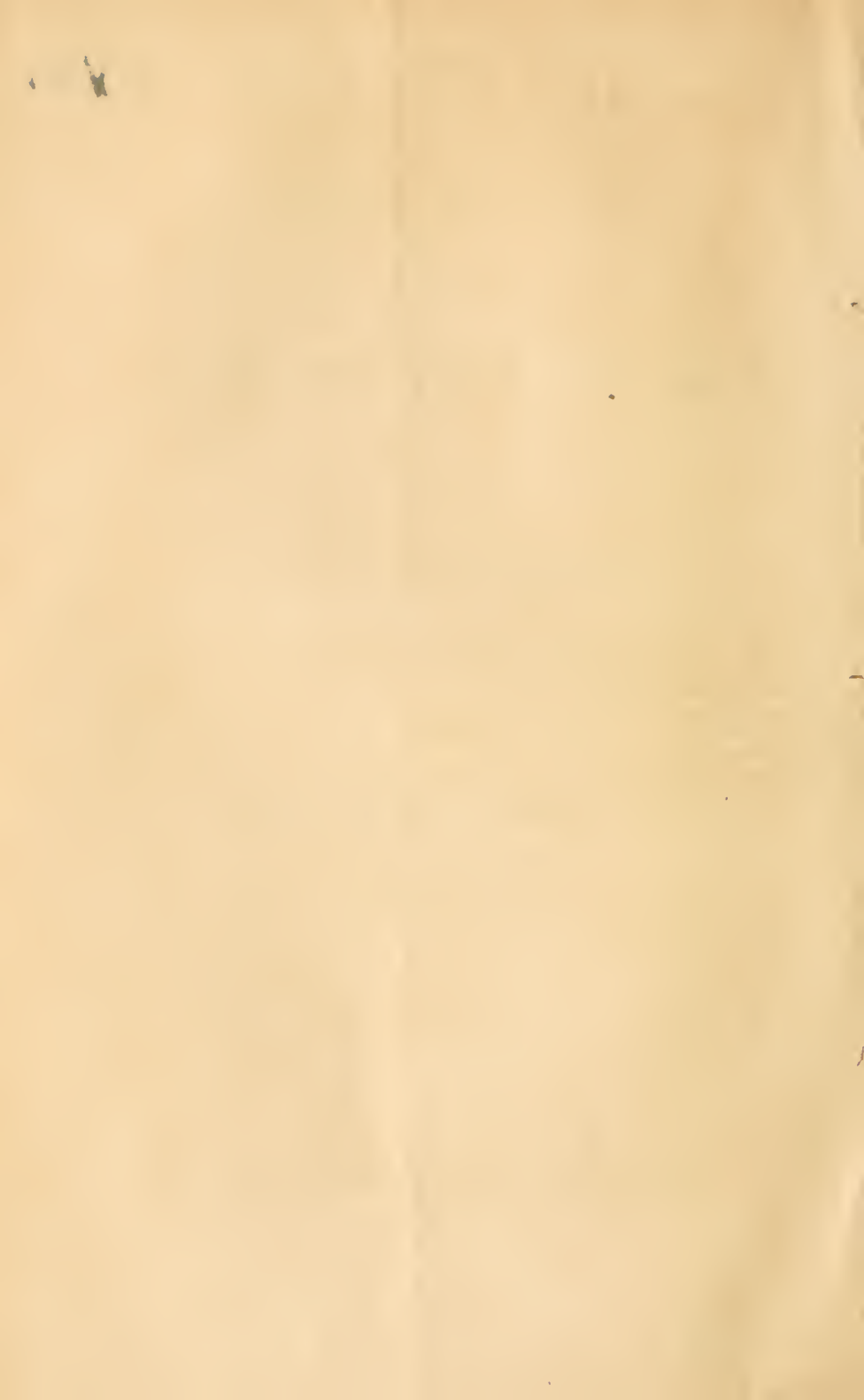
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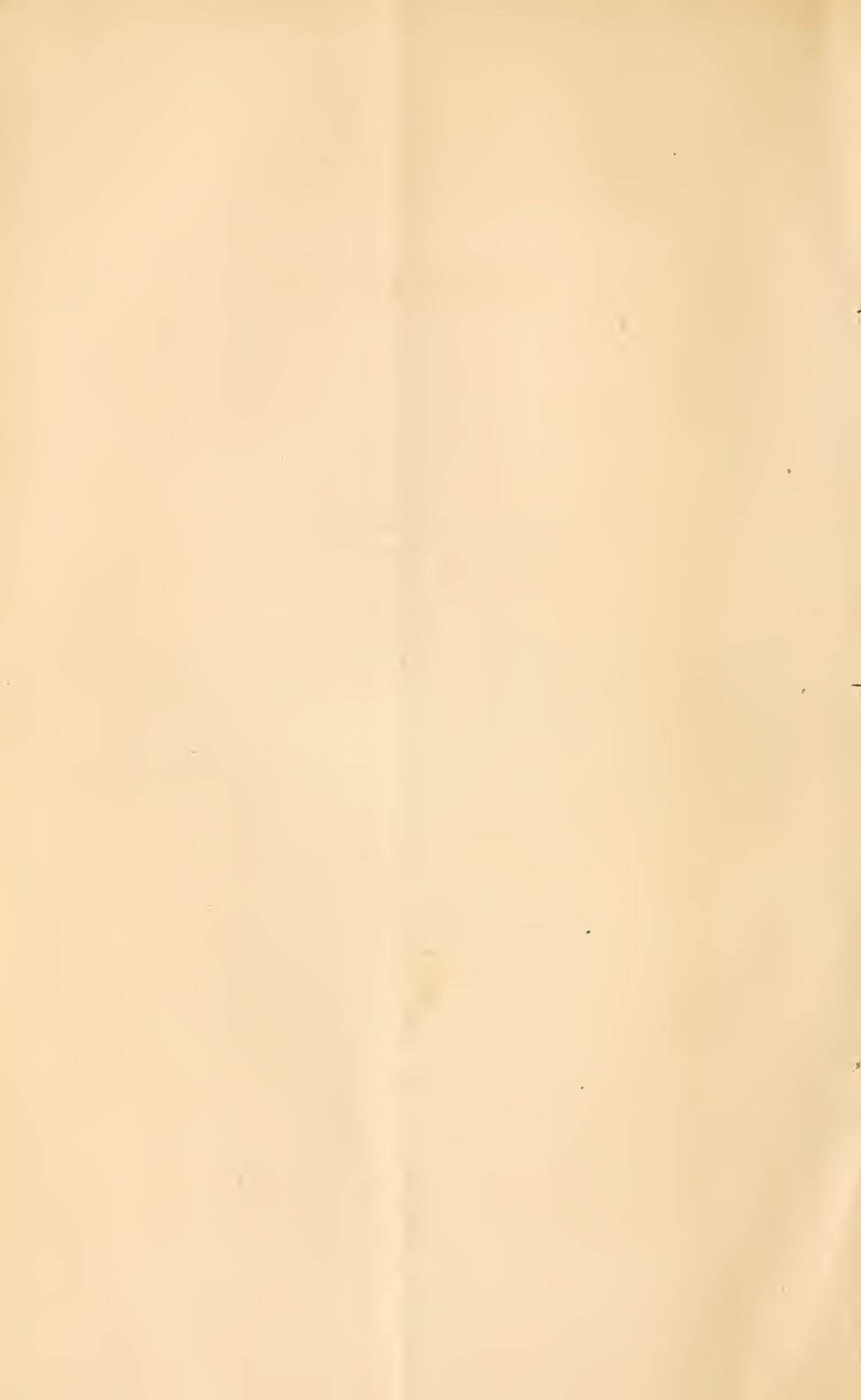
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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE following discourse (now slightly altered) was prepared and delivered in the ordinary course of ministerial labors, and with no view whatever to publication. The author now permits it to be published, not because he thinks it worthy of special attention, but in compliance with the request of gentlemen, whose judgment he greatly respects, and whose wishes, in such a matter, he is much disposed to gratify. Such as it is, he places it at their disposal, in the hope, and with the fervent prayer, that it may not be wholly unprofitable to them, nor to any one, who will seriously attend to the lessons of Providence and of practical wisdom, which it seeks to enforce.

J. M. C. B.



SERMON.

"Call to remembrance the former days."—*Hebrews*, 10 : 32.

THE APOSTLE would have his Hebrew brethren "call to remembrance the former days," that they might thereby be induced to persevere in their new religious life. The intimation, I think, is, that their past faithfulness and success should encourage in them the hope that these might continue; and, also, that the results of these past struggles and attainments would all be lost if they did not thus persevere.

Though not for precisely these reasons, yet for similar and no less important ones, my hearers, would I exhort you to "call to remembrance the former days." Quite as much do *we* stand in need of the benefits to be derived from such an exercise, and no less fraught with benefit to us will be such a faithful retrospect.

The season which has now arrived, renders this duty the more natural as well as the more imperative. We have just completed another year's journey along the pathway of life. As travelers to eternity, we should carefully note memory's record of the past, that we may be the better prepared to prosecute that part of the journey, be it long or short, which yet remains. With the closing hours of the past year, we have just given to another chapter in life's experience its finishing line. As this chapter, with every one that shall have preceded or come after it, must be examined before the bar of God, and reviewed by us throughout eternity, we should carefully review it now, ere it is forgotten, to the end that its merits may be retained, and its errors avoided in the future, and that its successor may be more creditable and satisfactory, to its authors, as well as more acceptable to "Him in whose hands are the issues of life and of death."

It is to assist you in this important duty, that I propose, now, to engage your thoughts for a few moments. And in doing this, I need scarcely remind you, that in the production of our past experience, two agencies are to be recognized: that of God, and that of ourselves. The

subject, therefore, naturally divides itself into two branches. And hence, in calling to your remembrance the former days, I shall dwell chiefly upon the dealings, therein conspicuous, of God with us, and of ourselves with God.

1. In recalling the first of these, we may, with peculiar appropriateness adopt the language of the inspired Psalmist—"I will sing of *mercy* and *judgment*, unto thee, O Lord, will I sing,"—for of both these elements did our past experience largely partake.

The former days, my hearers, have been to us days of *mercy*, at the hands of God. And to perceive this mercy, we have not far to look. It covers the whole of the past; it is mingled with every experience in life. No *one* of the former days, but *every one* of them, has been begun, and continued, and ended, amid the continual experience of God's providence and grace.

He has endowed us with faculties to sustain and perpetuate our natural lives, as, also, to enjoy life, and to minister to the welfare of others. And he has placed us in circumstances, and surrounded us with means, suited to the successful prosecution of these ends. Actual destitution, as it exists in many parts of the world, resulting even in starvation and death, we have not known. So far have we been from this, that not only the necessities and comforts, but even the luxuries of life have more or less fallen to the lot of us all. And we have even had wherewith to minister to the necessities of others, and thus to receive the blessing of the poor, and of the God of the poor.

For the spiritual life, also, with which God has endowed us, has he amply provided; for while some may have "hungered and thirsted after righteousness," none have been destitute of "the bread of life," or have been denied the privilege of drinking from the "well springs" of salvation. The pages of this blessed Book, with all its full, and rich, and royal instructions, admonitions and promises, have been opened to all; and therein the portals of eternity have been unbarred, the gates of heavenly glory wide open flung, and every outcast from God, every wanderer from virtue's paths, every child of misfortune and sin, permitted, yea, invited to enter and be made the companion of the good, the great, and the Almighty! The voice of the Son of God, in the faithful, living, ministry of his own Divine Word, has still been heard, proclaiming, "Preach the Gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved"—"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"—and "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out." And not only have these unspeakable favors been offered to us, which they have not been to more than half of our fellow beings,

but for our acceptance of them, or manner of using them, we have been held responsible to no human tribunal, to no other authority than that of God himself. Our public, as well as our private, worship of God, and outward conformity to his laws and ordinances, has been denied or obstructed by no intolerant and oppressive control, such as fetters and degrades the heritage of God in every other nation under heaven.

But even more positive and particular than this has been our experience of God's goodness; for whatever may have been our conduct and relations to him, however thoughtful or thoughtless of these tokens of his regard, he has never, for a moment, lost sight of us, or withheld from us any of the elements of a prosperous and useful life. As a father loves and provides for his dutiful children, has God loved and provided for us; but as no human parent ever endured, pitied and blessed his undutiful and rebellious children, has God even thus dealt with us. For while he has not been slow to afford us the tokens of his pardoning favor and gracious acceptance, whenever we have returned from our wanderings, and sought forgiveness through his Son, he has yet followed us with his mercies, and guarded us by his providence, even whilst lost in transgression, and exposed to all the dangers of a worldly and impenitent life. Holding in his hands, as he does, the absolute power of life and death, it has been a striking proof of his loving kindness to us, that he has not cut us off and consigned us to our graves in the midst of our rebellion and guilt, or at a moment, when, as Christians even, we have yielded to the tempter, and have indulged ourselves in some unholy thought, feeling or action. How awful to think of being called to appear before the "Judge of the quick and the dead," at such a time, and in such a condition! And yet how merciful in God not to have selected just such a time to call us to our account, when the proof of our guilt would have been the most unquestionable and complete! Had he been prompted by anger towards us, or only by such pity as dwells in human bosoms, such, undoubtedly, would have been his treatment of us, long ere this.

Need I suggest what should be our feelings and conduct, upon such a review of God's mercies to us during the past year? Need I assist you to infer, that we ought, with the Apostle John, to "love him because he first loved us?" or how bitter, and unnatural, and hateful a thing is sin against such a God; and how deep and pungent should be our repentance of it; and how persevering and increasing should be our efforts to subdue it within us, and to be found ever obedient to his holy will? And need I say a single word more in favor of the claims of such a Being to our confidence and trust—a trust which shall fill the soul with peace, and

joy even amidst the disappointments and trials of life, and the gathering shades of death? Let us with such emotions call to remembrance the former days of God's mercy, and those days will not have been spent, nor that mercy bestowed in vain.

But *all* the former days have not been days of apparent mercy. Some of them, as you well know, have been days of "judgment"—of severe affliction; such as but few in this community have ever before witnessed.

It is indeed but a proof of God's wisdom and love, as exercised for the good of his creatures, that he chastens them as his children, for the errors they indulge. "What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" And yet, "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterwards it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised thereby." It is not, then, while we are enduring the pain or passing through the trial, that God sends upon us, that we can fully understand its design, or derive from it all the profit it is suited to impart; we can do this only by reviewing it as past. And if the merciful design of God in these judgments is accomplished, this we shall in all cases be led to do.

The year that has just closed, has been to us, my hearers, one of more than ordinary trial and providential adversity. Not only have we, time after time been startled and amazed by the tidings of calamity and death, in our own, as well as in foreign countries, by the pestilence, the elements, and the sword, but from some of these calamities, the most, if not all of us, have been more or less sufferers. It is true, that the destroying angel has not *poured out* upon us the vials of God's displeasure as he has upon others of our fellow countrymen. It is true that a few *drops* only have fallen upon us; but these few have been such as to have left their mark most distinctly; and as individuals, as a community, and as a church and congregation, we have had just cause solemnly to "lay it to heart."

At a time when all was calm and tranquil about us, and nature seemed incapable of harm or peril, God, as if to teach us our weakness and our dependence on him, let loose the furious winds, and sending them forth upon the bosom of the mighty deep, awakened this reposing giant from his slumbers, and with their mighty agency, swept away the hopeful earnings of industry, and the proud anticipations of opulence and avarice. Of the lesson this was designed to teach us, who could be ignorant? Who does not read in it the majestic enforcement of the divine injunction, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," where your inheritance will be "in-

corruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away." And who, that perceives this, does not more cheerfully accept the lesson taught us, when he considers that for *just half a century* God had not resorted to such a method of enforcing it.

But our heavenly father had yet another lesson to impart to us. Scarcely had we recovered from the shock of this first calamity, when "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," *after an absence of nearly forty years*, appeared in our midst. Fresh from the work of desolation in our neighboring cities, and fixing his gloomy haunts amid the ranges and ravages of the late stormy visitant, he laid his withering hand upon the young and the old, and ere a short month had passed, a score at least of our friends and neighbors were numbered among his victims. Alas! from the execution of his dread commission, no age, nor sex, nor grade—no innocence of childhood, no charms of youth, no promises of manhood's vigor, no pleadings of parental fondness, nor of want and dependence, not even the utility and security of piety itself, could be allowed to divert him. But among the sad trophies of his power, the tender infant, the youth of ripening years, the maiden just blushing into womanhood, the cherished son of a mother's hopes, and of a father's pride, the sharer of conjugal affection, and the supporter of its trusts, the endearing object of filial love, and the faithful servant of God—all have been gathered.

Could words so impressively teach us, how uncertain is life—how inexorable is death? Let the experience of that trying occasion—let the memory of those who once, and but a short time since, listened with you to the voice that now addresses you, and who, though now slumbering within its reach, will hear its sound no more, solemnly admonish us of our approaching and inevitable destiny; ever remind us that at every period, and in every condition of life, we are constantly in the hands, and under the control of the great Maker and Ruler of the universe.

In that afflictive providence, my brethren, God came near to us, and removed from the embrace of kindred, and from the fellowship of his saints, some with whom we delighted to "take sweet counsel." Among them was the aged pilgrim, who had long toiled over the pathway of life, eager to follow in the steps of Him who had chosen her for his own, and anxious to secure and bequeath to one whom she most loved on earth, a mother's best and richest legacy—the life and death of a Christian. In that number was she, in whose gentle spirit, and useful, and exemplary life, the principles and practice of the true disciple were so nobly illustrated; whose presence in the sanctuary, at the prayer meeting, and in the Sunday school, was wont to cheer her fellow-laborers, and

evinced her hearty devotion to the service of Him who had bought her with his blood. In that number, too, we may reckon one who, though not formally united to the fold of Christ, yet gladly received the Shepherd's offered care, rejoiced to hear and obey his heavenly voice, and eagerly looked forward to the time when he should be "buried with Christ in baptism," and united with his people—united in all the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, labors and rewards which make up their portion in this life, and their passport to a better. But God, in his mercy, spared that youthful disciple the pain and toil, and accepted the wish of his heart for the service of his life.

Thus, my brethren, are we taught, that whether our race shall be prolonged to old age, or terminated in the midst of life and usefulness, or ended when it has but just begun, is a question which God alone can solve, and for which we are not held responsible. Amidst this uncertainty, how wise and how cheering, simply to commit ourselves to the hands of God, and while we "live not to ourselves, but to Him who died for us, and rose again," to rest in the assurance, that, come when death may, we shall not be called away until we shall have finished our course, and accomplished the work which our Lord has assigned us. If we can but comprehend and bear in mind these salutary truths, our late painful experience will not have been re-called in vain.

II. Such having been God's dealings with us, both in respect to his mercies and judgments, we should now "call to remembrance" the character of our dealings with him, and inquire how we have been affected by his providences, and how we now stand affected by them.

The corrections which the true parent employs with his child, not only imply faults in that child, but are intended for their removal. They, therefore, either soften or harden, either reform or confirm. And it is thus that we are to view the providences of God, which stand recorded in the chapter of our last year's experience. In the corrections with which God saw fit to visit us, we perceive the evidences of our guilt and imperfection; in the bitter and trying remedies which he thought proper to prepare for us, we perceive the proofs of our sinful corruption, and of the soul's deadly malady. Alas! my hearers, if we only glance at the past, we at once call to remembrance many days of folly and sin—of inordinate love of the world or attachment to its pursuits, or of indulgence of the sinful propensities of our natures. And for these things, God in his mercy, corrected us. Having allured and caressed us with his smiles and favors, he next alarmed and awakened and dissuaded us by his judgments. Have we profited by these dealings? Have we lamented our past transgressions, and abhorred the corruption they implied, and blessed

the hand that only corrected us for them, without crushing and destroying us forever? Has the effect of these providences been to make us live more "soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world," more mindfully of our latter end, and more conformably with the precepts and requirements of God's holy Word? If not, then is our condemnation enhanced, and our distance from God, and holiness, and heaven, awfully increased. If these remedies which God in his providence, has prepared, and administered to us, have not checked nor abated our spiritual maladies, God only knows whether they are not, in the cases of some of you, utterly incurable!

Thank God, my brethren, that our experience of these mercies and judgments, at the hands of God, we have reason to think, has not been wholly fruitless of good; that it has already inspired us with a deeper conviction of our absolute dependence upon God, and with a stronger assurance that sin is indeed the parent of all our evils, and that the fear of "the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Thank God, that amidst the follies and failings of the past—amidst the many precious days and moments wasted in negligence or squandered in fruitless toils and regrets, we yet can recall a few deeds worthy of an immortal soul, a few moments spent in the love, and worship, and service of God, and in preparing to meet him in judgment! Ah, these are the days, the days spent in such works, the days of honest labor for humanity, and holiness, and heaven—these, these are the days which the heart instinctively loves to recall! What else is pleasant, or worthy to be remembered? The memory of our past *sorrows* only recalls and re-enacts the occasions that excited them. The memory of our past *gains* is mingled and saddened with the conviction of their smallness and inadequacy: and the memory of our past *joys and pleasures*, with the reflection that they are past, never to return—and we *mourn* that it is so: but the recollection that we have suffered one pang, endured one act of self-denial, or performed one honest deed in the cause of virtue—in obedience to the claims of truth, and in the support and propagation of our holy religion, is a possession above all price, a treasure with which the enlightened reason and sanctified conscience would not willingly part for all the wealth, and wisdom, and honors of the world!

Here then, my friends, we have the measure and criterion of true riches. This is what will determine and fix forever our rewards in that world of solemn realities, to which we are hastening. When "the father of the faithful" said to the rich man in torment, "*Son, remember,*" he taught the solemn truth, that the memory of past obedience, of a life spent in the love and service of God, is the only treasure that can ac-

company us into eternity, and prepare us for a place among the blood-washed, white-robed throng of heaven; and that whatever else may be our possessions in this world—however rich, or learned, or renowned, or amiable, or refined, the absence of this recollection will render us poor, and destitute, and miserable forever! My brethren, if you would be rich indeed—in God's estimation, and throughout all eternity, let your experiences be crowded with such deeds and reminiscences; let your lives be chiefly devoted to doing good, and your best gifts employed in the service of that Master, who says to all his followers, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." Oh, with such a Master to serve, and with the promise of such a reward for our service, how just will be the condemnation of the idle and disobedient servant—how righteous the sentence which that Master will pronounce, when, at the great judgment day, he shall rise up and proclaim, "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!"

In view of these solemn truths, my Christian friends, how small and unsatisfactory seems the service we have rendered to God and religion during the past year! Who does not heartily wish that he might be permitted to pass over it again, and to improve the record it contains. But this we cannot do. That record is now made. It is safely deposited in the archives of eternity, and it will confront us at the bar of God! Oh, then, let us resolve, that if we may not improve, we *will*, at least, profit by the past; that if the memory of its unfruitfulness cannot be effaced, it shall abide here only to incite us to higher and holier achievements in the future. In the strength of God, let us resolve to live, and think, and act every day, and hour, and moment, for eternity, and to do nothing at any time that does not comport with the character and feelings of one, who "looks not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Thus living, my brethren, the flight of time, and the succession of years, and the approach of death, will cause us no dismay; for we shall reflect, with the Apostle, at the return of every season like this, that "now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." And as that period approaches, which will terminate our wanderings and journeyings forever, more joyfully shall we hail the signal of our triumph, while our Lord proclaims to all his departing saints, "Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh!"

But, my friends, if any of you are still out of Christ, destitute of the humility and holiness of the Gospel, strangely attempting to satisfy the thirsty soul at the broken cisterns of worldliness and vanity, while the

streams of heavenly grace, fresh from the fountain of living waters, are making glad the city of our God; "laboring only for the meat that perisheth," and regardless of "that which endureth unto everlasting life," let me solemnly assure you, that it is no "redemption," no "salvation," that these revolving years are bringing to your possession, but an eternity of torturing regrets and hopeless destitution! May God forbid that any of you should longer run the risk of testing the truth of this by your own experience! But—

"So live, that when the summons comes, to join
The innnumerable caravan, that moves
To the pale realm of shade, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon; but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."



